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Around the World in 80+ Books

engaging with students to create reading lists and conversations

The 80+ Books project was not intended to be an experiment with Web 2.0. It began during a conversation with the University of Bath's Racial Equality Officer in which we were discussing auditing library services with regard to equity and diversity. At the time I was re-designing library space, creating a flexible learning area to support group working. Within this project I was conscious of the need to ensure that this locality was inclusive and had a sense of 'ownership' for those using it. I should also mention here that almost 25% of the University's population are international students. With this project in the forefront of my mind, the conversation around the racial equality audit developed along interesting lines as we began to explore, share and develop ideas.

As our conversation continued, I was asked to consider whether we should be thinking about borrowing patterns by ethnic/racial grouping. My initial reaction was that this would not serve a practical purpose as my interest in borrowing patterns of library resources focussed on the students' academic or attendance profile rather than cultural factors. As we talked we began to think about leisure reading – not an area I have a direct remit to collection build in, but we wondered if there was material already in our collections which we could explore from a cultural perspective in collaboration with the students, maybe through creating reading lists based on personal recommendation.

On my wall was the 'Renaissance Calendar'¹ - a lovely calendar with pictures of beautiful library buildings recommended by others. This inspired us to consider students' experiences of libraries before they come to University and to capture their observations in a visual exhibition. We would then include it in the re-designed area of the library building to add to the ownership and social inclusion aims of the project.

Following this initial inspirational meeting I began to develop these ideas, drawing the two themes together. I didn't just want a static exhibition of beautiful pictures or a list of books; I wanted to capture students' personal views of libraries and books from their home countries and share this with others. I developed a set of indicative principles. The exhibition would be of images of libraries that the students had actually used, with an accompanying brief statement about what it had meant to them – something about the 'library as place' from a personal perspective. The books should be a recommended list chosen to give other readers an insight into their home country. It should be a personal choice, not necessarily the 'great literature' of the country. With these principles in mind I began working with a group of colleagues to develop an exhibition and accompanying reading list, which was eventually branded as 'Around the World in 80+ Books'.

We invited all students, both home and international, to participate – but also directed much of our attention to the international students who we reached through a variety of means, mostly their own networks. These meetings were often with a group of students of different nationalities where discussion, sharing of ideas, opinions and anecdotes flowed. As we engaged with the students and talked to them about their reading choices we started to hear many fascinating stories about what they were recommending and why. We learnt what the books meant to them and how in their opinion they gave an insight into their home country. What we had initially envisaged as an

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exhibition and a list of books was beginning to take shape, but we began to recognise that it was a great shame that these conversations were not being shared with others.

It was at this point that a colleague came to see me to discuss an idea she wished to develop around the catalogue. She was interested in experimenting with Web 2.0 technologies and wanted to incorporate 'Amazon style'² reviews into the Library Catalogue. This seemed very exciting to me, but I had some reservations about plunging straight into academics' reading lists. The 80+ Books reading lists were, however, a safe place to play as they supported leisure reading and they were also an area where we wanted to facilitate debate and idea sharing. It seemed a natural move to put the two together. Clearly the next stage was to decide how to do this.

Following technical discussions with stakeholders we came down to two options – either to attach wikis to each 80+ record or to import or link to existing reviews on sites such as 'LibraryThing'³. We decided to go for the wiki approach as this limited engagement to University of Bath students and allowed us to request authentication before any entries could be made. We did not intend to mediate the wiki content and thought that by attaching ID to the comments it would be self-policing and responsible.

The building-blocks are all in place. The wikis are now all attached to the 80+ records and this continues as more suggestions are received. The accompanying exhibition is a visual marketing tool within the library building, attracting a great deal of interest and new recommendations, with 'take-away' booklists accompanying it. We are now setting about engaging with the students again to encourage them to populate the wikis. This, we think, is the tricky bit. We have secured money from our Alumni to buy new resources for this project (both in the original language and in English) as they are recommended. We are re-using trusted communications channels and networks to reach international students, and plan to also use the information we have available to us from our circulation records to encourage participation. Based on the 'Expedia'⁴ model where if you book a hotel through them on your return you are encouraged by e-mail to follow the link back to the hotel and add your own review, we are planning to do the same when books on the 80+ booklist are returned. We are using links to join up the collections and to encourage our users to follow connections. Now the wikis are in place, we are asking the person who recommended the book in the first place to start off the dialogue by adding their views to the wiki, as often it is being the first to add anything that can present a barrier.

I would hope that this is just the beginning. As we have discussed this project with academics we have had nothing but encouragement and no reservations about this being rolled out for their own reading lists in the future. Those involved in delivering staff development sessions to academics, especially teaching practice, are particularly interested in trying to engage in some discussion around recommended resources with a diverse group of academics in different disciplines. The idea of using this technology to engage with others in critical reflection and evaluation of readings is certainly very interesting. I wonder also if, in the light of such national schemes as SCONUL Access, we could extend this nationally and join up our collections this way, thereby exploring our collections, making links and connections nationally and joining up our academic communities? This may be the big picture for future discussions. I shall end this piece with another picture, that of a recommended library (Malmo, in Sweden) and reading list to give a flavour of the contributions we have had so far.

"...it consists of three parts: one is a old castle which houses classical literature, the other is a brand new glass and concrete building named the "Calendar of Light" housing academic and factual books, a cylinder shaped building connects the two. It always gets me when you walk from one part to the other how you are walking from one world to another..."



Guillou, J.	<i>Ondskan.</i>
Lindgren, A.	<i>Pippi Longstocking</i>
Lindgren, A.	<i>Bröderna Lejonhjärta</i>
Moberg, V.	<i>The Emigrants</i>
Moberg, V.	<i>Unto a Good Land</i>
Moberg, V.	<i>The Settlers</i>
Moberg, V.	<i>The Last Letter Home</i>
Söderberg, H.	<i>Doktor Glas</i>
Strindberg, A.	<i>Miss Julie</i>

For more information on this project, please see www.bath.ac.uk/library/international/exhibit.html

¹ Renaissance Calendar: <http://www.renaissancelibrary.com/>

² Amazon: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/>

³ LibraryThing: <http://www.librarything.com/>

⁴ Expedia: <http://www.expedia.co.uk/>



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